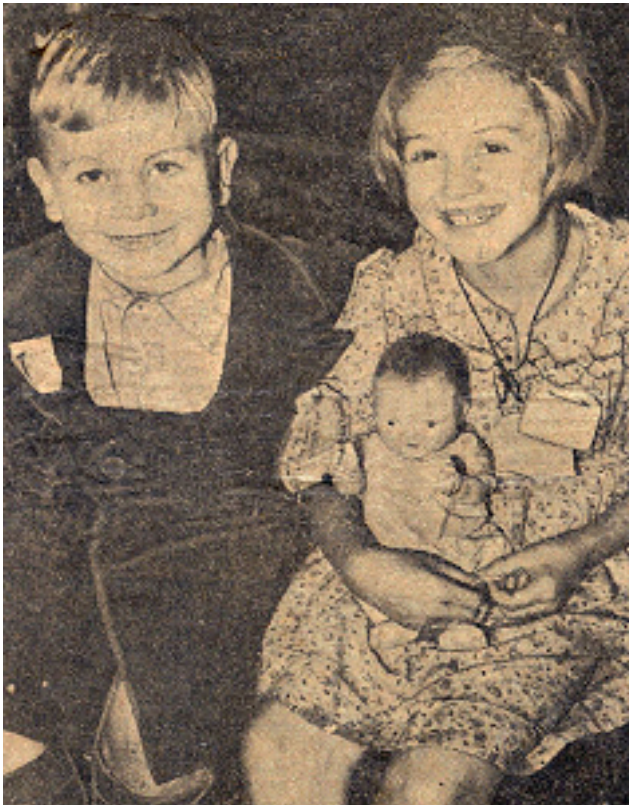


Grace Wilson nee
Blackman and
Percy Blackman
British Evacuee
Children
Hilary
August 16, 1940



Canada! Home at last!

Grace (Blackman) Wilson &
Percy Blackman

Grace's Story:

It had only been the night before that Mom told us we were going to Canada, and not to Plymouth, as we originally thought. Percy and I were so excited! We were overjoyed! Just so happy that we were going back to Canada...until Mom told us we were going alone. They weren't coming with us.

My parents immigrated to Canada, from England, in 1920. My brother and I were

born in Timmins, Ontario where my father was a gold miner. Our family moved back to Enfield, England in 1938, a year before the war began.

There had been so much secrecy surrounding our departure. Nobody, not even our friends could know about us sailing across the war-infested ocean. It was the end of July 1940, and the British government thought a German invasion was imminent. We'd already spent many nights sleeping on a bench in the air raid shelter while Dad stayed outside to watch the dog fights between our planes and the German planes. Percy and I would walk past the bombed out buildings on our way to school. At this point my parents decided that their children's safety was the most important thing and they would send us back to Canada. They made arrangements with their very good friends in Timmins, George and May

Gibson, to take care of us until we could return to England, thinking it would only be a few months.

So now, there we were, just the two of us, sitting on the train at the London railroad station, nervously waiting for the first stage of our journey to begin. My 7-year-old brother, Percy, was sitting next to the window and I was beside him, leaning across to get a last glimpse of my Mother and Granddad Reach as they waved to us from the platform. I waved back with all my energy, but my 8-year-old heart was breaking. I was trying so very hard to be brave but tears just kept tumbling down my face. As Mom and Granddad were disappearing from our view, I'm sure that their hearts were breaking, too. Granddad no doubt knew that it would be the last time he would ever see us.

Upon arriving at Liverpool, the girls and boys were split up. For Percy and I, this was a terrible thing; the worst part of all! Mother had told us to 'Stay together', and 'Look after your little brother' and all of a sudden we were taken from the only person we knew. How could I possibly obey my Mother's wishes if I couldn't even be with my brother? As I faced the reality of my new situation and my inability to change it at the time, I adapted quickly and began to make new friends.

We spent two nights in Liverpool, in a large auditorium and experienced two air raids in one night.

I was to learn later that if Mother had known we were still in Liverpool, she would have come to get us. Her world was falling apart without her children. She thought that she and Dad had made the wrong decision to let us go.

We boarded the R.M.S. Hilary in early August, the second Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) ship to leave for Canada, carrying 164 children and numerous other passengers. Although my memories of the ship are vague I remember it as being a long but pleasant voyage. I shared a cabin with three other girls. All the CORB children were on one deck and the remainder of the ship was filled with other passengers returning to Canada.

My brother was very seasick and spent most of the trip in his cabin. I was allowed to visit him each day. I spent a lot of time on deck and one day we saw a submarine pull up beside us as we all looked over at it. It looked like a tiny little thing compared to our ship. I guess it must have been one of ours. Good thing!"

The sailors on the Hilary were really good to us and we had great fun when they were around.

We attended church services on board the ship. I remember singing a hymn, "For those in Peril on the Sea", and to this day, whenever I hear that song it reminds me of that voyage.

The Hilary arrived safely at Pier 21 on the afternoon of August 16, 1940, while the worst bombing raids of the war were being reported in England. The docks were full of people wanting to welcome us to Canada. A band was playing, and people were throwing money onto the ship for us. Although it was strange money to us, we thought this was wonderful! According to the newspaper, we spent two days on board the ship at Pier 21, but I don't really remember that. I do remember going into a very large building, much larger than it is today, with my tiny little suitcase, my teddy bear, doll and my CORB identification tags hanging around my neck. I was # 593.

Next, we boarded the train bound for Toronto and Percy and I were back together again! As we moved slowly through different train stations on route, people would pass money and sweets to us through the open windows. Rationing had already started in England and this was the first candy we'd had in a long time.

The most memorable part of my journey occurred when we arrived in Toronto. We were sent to the residence at the University of Toronto and put through a lot of health tests. One boy on the ship had diphtheria and I was tested and found to be a diphtheria carrier. They immediately locked me in a room and when Percy came to see me, they had him locked out. He started crying, kicking and pounding at the door, trying to get in while I was inside, kicking and crying in vain, trying to see my brother. Once again we were separated. This was the last contact I was to have with Percy for 14 weeks. He was sent off to Timmins and I was sent off to Riverdale Hospital in Toronto.

Brenda, a young teenager, was also detained as a carrier, so there we were, in the hospital and feeling great. The nurses were absolutely wonderful to us and did everything they could to make us comfortable, entertained and happy. On one occasion they took me to the nurses' residence so I could listen to my Mom on the radio. My brother, who was in Timmins by now, was also listening to Mom as she spoke to us from England. I remember answering all her questions, "Are you being a good girl?" "Oh yes!" although I knew she couldn't hear me. It was exciting that Mother could communicate with us this way, especially since I was missing her so much. It was a big deal!

In those days, little girls wore dresses and I came to Canada with a couple of everyday dresses and one party/Sunday school dress. I

remember that when I got to Toronto I thought 'I can wear any dress I want!' because my mother wasn't there to tell me I couldn't, so I started to wear my party dress everyday!

We had left England in the summer and didn't bring winter clothes with us. As my stay in the hospital stretched on until the beginning of December the Red Cross brought me a green coat, hat, leggings, and winter clothes.

Whenever we left the hospital grounds we had to wear masks across our nose. We were quarantined from everybody except the prisoners in the Don Jail, who use to shovel the snow - we were allowed to talk with them.

The nurses took Brenda and me to see the Santa Clause Parade, and we watched it from a room high up in a building, by ourselves. That's the only time I got to the Santa Clause Parade.

After 13 weeks in the hospital, they took my tonsils out. They said the germs were behind the tonsils, and just after that they told me I could go 'home' (to Timmins). By then Brenda had gone and I was feeling quite lonely. In the last letters that I sent from the hospital, I told my parents that I was being really spoiled by the nurses, since Brenda had left. Even a doctor must have been especially attentive to me because I asked my mother if I could marry him the next year - even though he wasn't quite as good as Dad.

Auntie May came all the way down from Timmins on the train to get me and take me back with her. What a wonderful reunion that was!

In Timmins we were like little celebrities, very newsworthy at the time, because we were evacuees and the people of Timmins felt sorry for us. We were invited to all the parties and were photographed for the papers when we set up a table to sell lemonade and cookies to raise money for the war effort.

Auntie & Uncle (as we called them) were very good to us, and their daughters, Marjorie and Dorothy made us feel like part of the family. But one noon hour I had a terrible argument with them and said I wasn't coming back. After school I went to a girlfriend's house. Later, when I finally decided to head home, Auntie and Uncle were frantic! All they knew was that I hadn't come home from school and they had the police out looking for me. Oh, boy! Did I get into trouble that night! Auntie May sent a letter to Mother telling her what had happened. Dad took the letter to his Commanding Officer and it was this man that concluded that it was imperative to get his wife back to those children. Civilians were not

allowed to travel in those days so the officer pulled a lot of strings that set the process into action. Mother received a letter from the Prime Minister of Canada that she forwarded on to the Rt. Honorable Vincent Massey, High Commissioner to England, and through it gained priority rights to leave the country.

Mother arrived in Timmins by train, in January 1942. What a wonderful celebration that was. Again, the media were waiting with Percy and me, and a number of the local people, at the station for the arrival of her train. A large celebration party was held in honour of my Mother's return, as she still had a lot of friends in Timmins.

My father had joined the Canadian army in England and would eventually be discharged in Canada. Mother didn't want him going back into the gold mines so she decided to get away from Timmins. Within a few months we were on the train, waving goodbye to the Gibsons and all our friends, both Percy and I in tears again. We spent six weeks with Mother's friends in Hamilton, until she found us a home in Paris, Ontario. That's where Dad found us once he was discharged and I have lived in Paris ever since.

In recollecting this time in my life, I realize the profound impact it had on me. It helped to make me strong and independent, and at the same time, bring me even closer to my brother and family. I think it made us all appreciate the times we were able to spend together.

Percy's Story

I vividly remember 1940 and the sound of the air raid sirens blaring. It was becoming a nightly occurrence and you'd think we'd get use to it, but no, you never do. It's a sound I'll never forget. Mother would rush my sister and I into the dugout air raid shelter across the street while Dad watched all the action going on in the air.

Up until this time I thought living in England was okay, but I really missed Canada. My sister and I had been born in Timmins, Ontario but in 1938 Dad moved us back to his homeland to open a business. I was very young and my memories are few but some things of England stand out - a Christmas tree decorated with real candles, our dog named Jack, and a man pushing a fruit cart who gave me my first ever banana. Then the war started and everything changed. Mom and Dad decided that we should return to Canada for safety.

During the war, the sailing of ships were kept very secret, for security reasons. Grace and I were not told of our imminent return to Canada

until the eve of our departure. We were not given the opportunity to say goodbye to our friends. I was excited but I didn't want to leave my parents. I was only 7 years old and was expected to sail halfway around the world with just my 8 year-old sister to take care of me. I remember looking out through the window of the train as we were leaving the London station, seeing my mother, and just breaking down in tears.

We arrived in Liverpool where they would not allow the boys and girls stay together. Grace and I were split up and I think that was probably the saddest day of my life. I have always felt that there should have been some exceptions and that brothers and sisters should have been kept together. We had two nights in Liverpool and every night we marched to the air raid shelters. I thought my world had ended with all the bombing going on.

We came to Canada on the R.M.S. Hilary, the second ship carrying children. Being on the ship was such a trying time for me and my memories of it are vague. I was a very sick boy and spent most of the trip in a cabin that I shared with three other boys. I was really missing my family, and especially Grace, because she was closest to me. I kept thinking things would be better when we got to Canada because Grace and I would be together again.

One interesting thing I remember about the ship was that it had showers. This was a new experience for me since we'd always had a bath.

August 16, 1940 was a great day! That was the day we arrived at Pier 21 and I was so happy! The voyage was over! After being so sick on the ship it was a relief to see solid land again. Arriving in Canada was a 'celebration time' and I remember it well!

Before we disembarked the ship I remember standing on the deck near the bow. I don't think anyone was around me. Probably because I was so little, a workman on the dock singled me out and threw me a nickel. That was the first nickel I ever made, and some people say I still have it. I kept using it to buy gum, but the grown-ups would give me the gum and the nickel back. I finally went broke in Toronto.

Everything we had was in one little suitcase and what was on our backs. We really must have looked like refugees! I still have the bible that I had to bring with me. It was from Sunday school in England and is inscribed on the front.

We boarded the train for Toronto right there at Pier 21. The trip to Toronto was like a party! Grace and I were together again! The train

windows were open and people passed chocolate bars and candy to us whenever we stopped. We were like celebrities!

From there we were sent to the University of Toronto, and the nightmare began again. Grace was sent to the hospital for diphtheria and I ended up in a dormitory. All the other children had gone on to their respective homes and I was left, in this huge room with rows and rows of beds, all alone, for about 3 nights. I was scared skinny. This was such a traumatic experience for 7 year-old me, that I remember wetting the bed and lying in it so nobody would know. A lady would come in and talk to me from time to time as I waited for my ride to Timmins. What a devastating time that was! People thought they were doing the right thing, but I'm not so sure. "How would you feel if they took you away from your mother and sister, your sister most importantly, because she is with you - she is suppose to be with you?"

I was given a ride to Timmins where I finally arrived at Uncle George and Auntie May Gibson's place. They were very good friends of my parents, and arrangements had been made for Grace and me to stay with the Gibson's for the duration of the war. It was wonderful being back in Timmins, and to see people I knew. Their two daughters, Dorothy and Marjorie, were quite a bit older than I was and were very kind to me. They lived in a small but comfortable, two storey Hollinger House.

This was such a happy time for me. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. I was like the son Uncle George never had, and I could do no wrong! He became very important to me, too, especially since my own Dad was so far away. I thought the world of Uncle George. In those days everyone burned slabs in the stoves for cooking and heating, so there were always lots to pile or carry in. I remember working, piling slabs in the backyard and then Uncle George taking me to the drug store to buy me a pop. That was something! The winter weather was wonderful for the outdoor skating rink. I had my picture taken for the newspaper, when my mother spoke to us from England, over the radio. And at one point I did manage to get the strap in school, for kissing a girl in the cloakroom. Maybe it was Shania Twain's grandmother!

By the time Grace arrived in Timmins I was very well settled and content and had made many new friends. One friend from that neighbourhood has remained a good friend ever since.

I think Grace had more problems than I did, adjusting to our new environment. One day she ran away and everyone was searching for her. Soon after that Mom sailed during the height of the Battle of the Atlantic and, luckily, arrived safely in Timmins on January 23, 1942. Because of the strict secrecy, we only found out she was coming once the ship had

docked in Halifax. We remained in Timmins until May at which time Mom moved us to Hamilton. Leaving Timmins and the Gibson's this time was incredibly sad. Neither Grace nor I were happy in Hamilton.

A couple of months later we moved to Paris, Ontario where I have lived ever since. Although we were such a long distance from Timmins, we remained in contact with, and visited the Gibsons occasionally during their lives.

Years later, my wife and I went back to Liverpool and stood on the dock. I was shrouded in an unexplainable feeling, as if there was something there but I couldn't quite grasp it. There was also a clock that took me back, more than anything.



For years I'd wake up in bed and the ceiling would be just inches above my face. It was like a very bad dream and I'd awake in a sweat. It wasn't until years later, that my wife and I took a cruise on an old ship that had bunk beds. On a very rough night at sea I woke up in the top bunk and the ceiling was right there. I knew then that my nightmarish experience stemmed from my days and nights on the Hilary. I had been in the bottom bunk with the top bunk being just slightly above me. Once I realized the cause of these nightmares, they stopped!

In my adult years, I have come to realize what exceptional and special people the Gibson's were to have accepted others into their home for an indefinite period of time. They gave up a lot for us, and even their

teenage daughters shared a room so we might have a place to stay. They provided us with a loving home. My sister, Grace, and I truly appreciate and thank them for their kind and unconditional generosity that they showed us during this most difficult stage of our young lives.

Did my parents make the right choice, sending us to Canada? Yes, for me, they definitely did. It wasn't always easy but it's where I wanted to be. It's my home.